

Title: Performing Failure? Anomalous Amateurs in Jérôme Bel's *Disabled Theater* and *The Show Must Go On 2015*

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Performing Failure? Anomalous Amateurs in Jérôme Bel's *Disabled Theater* and *The Show Must Go On 2015*

This article sets out to interrogate the use of amateur and professional disabled performers in an emerging strain of performance practice known as 'performing failure'. I will analyse two recent productions by Jérôme Bel – *Disabled Theater* in association with Theater HORA, seen as part of London Dance Umbrella in 2014 and the 2015 version of *The Show Must Go On* seen at Sadler's Wells Theatre, London. I want to question the premise that disabled actors have the potential to 'disable' the illusory potential of realist theatre, and consider the ethical implications of employing amateur and disabled actors to contribute to a discourse about theatrical representation.

Watching *Disabled Theater* and *The Show Must Go On 2015* my initial sense was that these pieces were preoccupied with issues arising out of a poetics of failure rather than disability. Over the past thirty years increasing numbers of experimental theatre and performance makers have produced work informed by the impossibility of mimesis, human vulnerability and failure. January 2015 saw the Secret Theatre Company at the Lyric Hammersmith devising *A Series of Increasingly Impossible Acts*, demonstrating the transition of this work into the mainstream. My research over the past twenty years has attended to the discourse and practice of performing failure, studying the work of companies such as Forced Entertainment, Nature Theater of Oklahoma, New York City

Players and GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN so it was perhaps unsurprising that I read Bel's collaborations with disabled actors as I did. My preoccupation led me to view their activities through a selective lens, to read the activities on stage in terms of how they subverted conventional dance and theatre form rather than conventional perceptions of disability. My initial thought was that Bel, as an established artist, known for his interest in 'weak bodies', had appropriated the work of disabled performers to function as a metaphor for theatrical and representational 'failure'.<sup>1</sup> I saw the opportunities for original creative input from the amateur and disabled performers to be comparatively limited and tokenistic and felt information about their lived experience to be marginalised. I saw the shows as being part of Bel's ongoing investigation into the postmodern impossibility of mimesis rather than as engaged with disability politics. I came to recognise that this reading in itself could be seen to exacerbate the oversight because it denies the performers' agency and sidelines their creative contributions. Reflecting upon my shortsightedness I returned to the work with fresh eyes and found the work to be more critically and socially engaged than it had at first appeared. When regarded from a different perspective the presence of disabled performers within this oeuvre can be seen to effectively critique the unmarked privilege of the able-bodied performers used elsewhere in examples of performing failure. For me the two viewpoints give rise to a productive tension and within this article I want to interrogate problems associated with romanticizing the work of amateur and disabled performers on the one hand

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<sup>1</sup> Una Bauer 'Jerome Bel: An Interview with Una Bauer' in *Performance Research* 13: 1 (2008), pp. 42-48 (p.48)

whilst arguing that collaborations with disabled actors can foreground an unmarked 'able-ism' on the other.

Sara Jane Bailes has associated a 'poetics of failure' with the staged presentation of, 'brokenness as a structural motif'. For her a poetics of failure:

acknowledges structural and semantic weakness and the appearance of the vulnerable, gesturing towards the incorporation of the redundant and the poorly conceived; towards subversion, diversion, difference, dissonance, dispersal, boredom, slipperiness, ineptitude, contagion, negotiation, corruptibility, uncertainty, and breakdown. ... [i]t shows up in the guise of unconvincing acting, coping (or not), awkwardness, and inability.<sup>2</sup>

The article that follows will be similarly marked by 'structural and semantic weakness' as I give voice to my uncertainty about how to theorise this work in an appropriately ethical manner. My uncertainty arises out of the unease I experience as I set out to do the conventional work of an academic: to occupy a position of authority and mastery. In terms of disciplinary authority, until recently I was covering new territory. Furthermore, I write as an able-bodied scholar with what might be described as a rather dry, 'academic' interest in Bel's collaboration with Candoco and Theater HORA. In order to problematize and query an art form, which is in turn designed to challenge conventional methods of knowledge-acquisition, I want to employ a self-reflexive tone and foreground tensions that arise when setting out to speak from a position of academic authority about performance, perception and disability. I have chosen to borrow

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<sup>2</sup> Sara Jane Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island and Elevator Repair Service* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), p.22.

aspects of what Della Pollock calls 'performative writing', which has, 'a long and varied history in anthropology, feminist critique and writing about performance, taking much of its impetus from the cross-disciplinary, 'break' into poststructuralism.'<sup>3</sup> For Pollock, performative writing is, 'both a means and an effect of conflict. It is particularly (paradoxically) "effective". It forms itself in the act of speaking/writing. It reflects in its own forms, its own fulfillment of form, in what amounts to its performance of itself, a particular, historical relation between author-subjects, reading subjects, and subjects written/read.'<sup>4</sup> The field of performing failure, like performative writing has been concerned with resisting discourses of certainty and mastery and as a result it feels appropriate to acknowledge this practice by borrowing the form of performative writing.

For Bel identification, that is the potential to see himself in a performance, disappears when, 'all the dancers are able-bodied and twenty-two to thirty-five years old'.<sup>5</sup> Bel's determination to use untrained performers and his desire to 'identify' with the bodies on stage suggests that he does have some interest in the dancers beyond their signifiatory potential. Nicholas Ridout supports Bel's sense that performers are often idealized or chosen for their aesthetic appeal.

Situating himself as a conventional audience member Ridout writes:

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<sup>3</sup> Della Pollock 'Performing Writing' in *The Ends of Performance* edited by Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York: New York University Press, 1998) p. 73-103 (p. 75-6.

<sup>4</sup> Pollock, 'Performative Writing' p.78.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Gaughan, 'Every Body on the Dance Floor: On Jerome Bel's Ballet' *HowlRound* blog December 17 2015 <<http://howlround.com/every-body-on-the-dance-floor-on-j-r-me-bel-s-ballet>> [Accessed 22 February 2016]

We know who we expect to see on stage. We expect to see actors. This needs saying: we do not even expect to see human beings, in all their diversity, but, as their representatives, a kind of group apart, more beautiful perhaps, more agile, more powerful and subtle of voice. Creatures who have been chosen on the basis of some initially desirable attributes, which they have subsequently honed and refined by means of professional training. So when we get something else, it appears as an anomaly, and a worrying one at that.<sup>6</sup>

Following Ridout, my hesitancy lies in the ‘anomaly’ of the presence of differently abled bodies on stage. The bodies in *Disabled Theater* and *The Show Must Go On 2015* are different from those a theatre, and particularly a dance audience would expect to encounter. However it is a little more complicated than Ridout suggests. For example, one element of unease arises from the question of whether, in *The Show Must Go On* there is an attempt to foreground the worrying anomaly of difference, or render it irrelevant. In both *The Show Must Go On* and *Disabled Theater* performers share short dance pieces they have choreographed themselves. A large proportion of the dances are set to recognisable popular music tracks and many signal a sense of joyful abandon on the part of the dancers. My sense is that that the ‘uplifting dance numbers’ work in two different ways: firstly they undermine disability as a negative value but secondly erode the subaltern subject position offered by disability politics. I recognise the value of using the work as part of a campaign for the visibility of disability politics but I am simultaneously haunted by the concern that the invisibility of most of the

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<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) p. 97.

dancers' conditions gives voice to a desire to construct the amateur 'everyman' as in some way impaired. Bel has spoken of his desire for greater visibility for people with disabilities but he has also stated that he 'see[s] disability in every human being now'. <sup>7</sup>

Adrian Kear is at pains to clarify the distinction between crafted amateurism and genuinely 'bad acting'. He provides reassurance that artists in the companies cited above are fully aware of what they are doing. He states that this is not: 'the hopeless imitations of acting that takes place evening after evening in the amateur theatre proper', but rather, 'a "new" form of amateurism brought about under the expert control of the director'. <sup>8</sup> This quotation throws the occasionally elitist nature of the discourse around performing failure into relief: for theorists such as Kear, the amateur actors are not on stage to realize their own sense of creativity but rather to draw attention to the absence of 'schooling'. Bailes has described the function of flawed acting within a poetics of failure as being equivalent to a '(false) amateurism' operating alongside techniques such as, 'interruption and stalling, incorporating inept or inadequate means to achieve a different end, the repetitive structure of the attempt, examining impossibility as a generative mechanism and awkwardness as a performance concept'. <sup>9</sup> Bailes' notion of a *false* amateurism is key here because it draws attention to what might be at stake when choreographers or directors *borrow* signs of amateurism or ineptitude for metaphorical effect. Matt Hargrave has suggested that radical amateurism could be a useful 'tactical device' for learning disabled artists, but

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<sup>7</sup> Kourias 'Interview with Bel' electronic article

<sup>8</sup> Adrian Kear 'Troublesome Amateurs: Theatre, ethics and the labour of mimesis' in *Performance Research*, 10.1 (April 2005), 26-46 (p.86).

<sup>9</sup> Bailes, *Performance Theatre*, p. 30

advises that the distinction should be made between ‘professional amateurs’ and ‘amateur professionals’ to mark the difference between an under-achieving intention and those who ‘under achiev[e] mastery intentionally’.<sup>10</sup> My argument is that if Bel’s work with Candoco and Theater HORA is seen as an extension of a type of theatre practice about an aesthetics of failure then it runs the risk of reductively co-opting signs of dis-ability or failure as part of an ‘*ableist* regime’.<sup>11</sup>

### *Disabled Theater*

*Disabled Theater* was created with Theater HORA, a Swiss theatre company of people with disabilities. Theater HORA invited Bel to work with the company who are trained as actors. *Disabled Theatre* features eleven Swiss actors and a translator/technician who sits to the side of the stage cueing up relevant tracks and translating from Swiss German into English. For the most part the performers are seated in a semi-circle onstage. The cast has been given six different assignments which ask them to: stand for a minute in silence before the audience; approach the microphone to describe the nature of their disability; state their profession; share their thoughts about the show and choreograph and perform an original dance to a piece of music of their choice. As Leon Hilton has noted:

[s]ome describe their disability in the medicalized language of “syndrome” and “genetic disorder”, while others offer their own interpretations of their conditions. Bright, who has Down syndrome, explains, “It’s called as well Trisomy-21. That means I have one

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<sup>10</sup> Matt Hargrave *Theatres of Learning Disability: Good, Bad, or Plain Ugly?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) p.220

<sup>11</sup> Andre Lepecki ‘Yes, Now, It’s Good Theater’ in *Disabled Theater*, p.159

chromosome more than you in the audience.” Miranda Hossle, tall and shy, reports that she is “a little slower than so-called normal.” Tiziana Pagliaro simply approaches the microphone and says, “I don’t know”.<sup>12</sup>

At the outset I found the experience of watching *Disabled Theater* unsettling. Audience members started to whoop and cheer soon after the dancing started and I could hear tutting and sharp intakes of breath as Julia Häusermann, one of the performers with Down’s syndrome, grabbed her crotch during a routine inspired by Michael Jackson. I felt ambivalent about the intention of the piece and concerned that, in this instance, the performer was being exploited and her exuberant dancing the object of ridicule. I wondered who Bel was addressing and was concerned that he might be co-opting signs of disability to further his contribution to a discourse that can be seen as rarefied and esoteric even within the field of performance studies. I recognised that Theater HORA actively sought Bel out but wondered at Bel’s reasons for starting to make questions of physical ability map onto the discourse of ‘performing failure’. I initially saw this work repeating a recognisable task-based formula, used by Bel in productions such as *Shirtologie* (1997) and *The Last Performance* (1998) and sensed that the performers were being incorporated into a pre-existing structure.

Although the production has been celebrated for including the creative input of the actors, interviews with cast members suggest that there were strict rules governing what they were and were not permitted to do. For example, Remo

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<sup>12</sup> Leon Hilton, ‘Presence, Rhetoric, Difference Jérôme Bel and Theater HORA’s Disabled Theater’, *TDR: The Drama Review*, 58:3, (Fall 2014) pp. 156-162 (p.158).



Beuggert revealed that, 'there was one actor who expressly did things on stage like waving to the audience and Jérôme told him three, four, or even five times and at some point he said, "If you do it again, you're out."' <sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Yvonne Schmidt has suggested that HORA's next production *Freie Republik HORA* (2014), in which performers were invited to 'do what you want – just the way you like it!' was a 'reflection of the experience made in and with *Disabled Theater*' suggesting that performers did feel constrained by the on-stage assignments. <sup>14</sup> Significantly, although the actors are ostensibly given 'agency' and invited to become dancers and choreographers they are ultimately framed as 'amateurs' because they are trained actors rather than dancers. As Gerald Seigmund writes:

The fact that the performers of Theater HORA are actors and actresses and not trained dancers is surely a central aspect here. Their bodies are not trained sufficiently in any kind of dance technique to teach them normative patterns of movement that some may master while others will not. <sup>15</sup>

Bel has been criticized for not pushing the actors to achieve the levels of professionalism expected of trained dancers. He has responded to this accusation by saying, 'When people say about *Disabled Theater*, they can do it much better I have to say, I have never been interested in this. I am interested in

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<sup>13</sup> Stahl, *Disabled Theater* p.89

<sup>14</sup> Yvonne Schmidt 'After Disabled Theater: Authorship, Creative Responsibility, and Autonomy in Freie Republik HORA' in *Disabled Theater*, ed. Sandra Umathum and Benjamin Wihstutz (Zurich and Berlin: Diaphanes 2015) pp. 227-240

<sup>15</sup> Gerald Seigmund – 'What Difference Does It Make? Or: From Difference to In-Difference – Disabled Theater in the Context of Jérôme Bel's work' in *Disabled Theater* pp. 13-34

what you are with your vulnerabilities or incapacities.’<sup>16</sup> For me, Bel’s ongoing interest in ‘vulnerable’ bodies took on a different emphasis when he began to collaborate with disabled theatre and dance companies because it represented a departure away from thinking about a generalised performance of failure for an able-bodied society. It can be seen to represent an extension of his ongoing interest in foregrounding the presence of the training and discipline behind performance virtuosity, and yet I wonder why, in interview, he does not reflect more readily upon the way that this new work points to the unspoken ableism of previous work.

Hilton approves of the way *Disabled Theater*, ‘implicitly references the way that disabled bodies have historically been subject to regimes of medical surveillance’, however he agrees that Bel comes ‘troublingly close’ to romanticizing the Theater HORA performers, as if their appeal might lie in their ‘unself-consciousness, transparency, or guilelessness’.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Bel has asserted that, ‘on stage their presence is phenomenal’.<sup>18</sup> Natalie Alvarez describes the problem of ‘romanticizing’ amateur actors. She takes particular note of Michael Sidnell’s co-option of Coleridge’s ‘ipseity’ and ‘alterity’ suggesting that part of the aesthetic appeal of the amateur’s work lies in his or her inability to, ‘achieve a state of alterity, that is virtuosity or mastery in a convincing and therefore undetectable embodiment and fusing of performer with role or task.’<sup>19</sup> If lack of ‘artifice’ is what attracts Bel to working with disabled and amateur actors then it

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<sup>16</sup> Sandra Umathum and Benjamin Wihstutz, ‘Interview with Jérôme Bel: It’s all about Communication’ in *Disabled Theater* pp. 163-174

<sup>17</sup> Hilton, p.233

<sup>18</sup> Umathum and Benjamin, *Disabled Theater*, p.172

<sup>19</sup> Sidnell quoted in Alvarez, ‘Divinely Amateur’ p. 237.

perhaps inadvertently celebrates the ways in which these actors have not been assimilated into appropriate systems of behaviour, despite their having been trained as actors. It is here, for me, that the problem of romanticising the work of amateur performers falls into relief. I recognise the meta-theatrical value of the untrained body, and its potential to draw attention to the otherwise unmarked conventions of training and realism, but the suggestion that amateur bodies cannot transform themselves, or become 'other' suggests that they are primarily identified by bodily 'immanence' and a perceived failure to transcend the constraints or limitations of the body. It is my concern that because *Disabled Theater* and *The Show Must Go On 2015* are part of a larger oeuvre; the performers' contribution is framed within an ableist paradigm. The performers are chosen to show what they can or cannot do and their work on stage runs the risk of being *brought into the service of* a philosophical discourse about representation in the age of postmodernity. Lepecki, for instance, has written that, '... discourse can only cope with this piece by making formulations about the socially exceptional status of the work's performers – whose whole being is thus reified and entirely located (despite the best of intentions) on their cognitive and mental impairments'.<sup>20</sup> The performers are given some opportunities to participate in the making of the performance, but I see these opportunities to be strictly controlled and aligned with a certain directorial vision. When read within the context of a larger discourse of 'performing failure' the radical potential of the piece for subaltern subjects runs the risk of being neutralized and regarded foremost as an experiment in deconstruction.

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<sup>20</sup> Andre Lepecki 'Yes, Now, It's Good Theater' in *Disabled Theater*, p. 143

### *The Show Must Go On*

*The Show Must Go On*, 2015 represented a re-staging of Bel's original 2001 piece of the same name. The 2015 London version was devised with Candoco Dance Company, a mixed ability dance company who were joined by fifteen amateur volunteers, recruited by open audition, each of whom identified as having a disability. For many performers the particular nature of their disability was not evident, the most visually obvious examples of 'impairment' could be seen in the bodies of Suzie Birchwood, who uses a wheelchair, Katy Francis who has Down's syndrome, Linda Fearon who appears to live with the effects of cerebral palsy and Tanja Erhart who uses crutches to move about the stage as her left leg has been amputated. *The Show Must Go On* is structured around a range of different musical tracks played by the technician seated at the front of the stage. As in the original version of the production performers respond to a perceived directive in each title, so they move towards one another during the Beatles' *Come Together*; they bask in the increasingly bright lights of the stage area in *Let the Sunshine In* by Hair and they embrace to the soundtrack of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds' *Into My Arms*. The chorus of tracks such as David Bowie's *Let's Dance* and Reel 2 Reel's *I Like to Move It* compel the performers to move props and body parts with abandon and joy. The soundtrack includes knowing references to theatrical spectacle, for example, the show starts with *Tonight* from *West Side Story* and the stage remains in darkness until *Let the Sunshine In* begins to play and the stage lighting is gradually introduced. When a ramp lowers the performers to sub stage-level the Beatles' *Yellow Submarine* is played and Queen's *The Show Must Go On* provides the eponymous climax to the evening. The technician makes several interventions into the flow of the music, for example he turns

down the volume during the verses of Simon and Garfunkel's *Sound of Silence* and the audience is left to consider a dark empty stage as John Lennon's *Imagine* is played.<sup>21</sup> For Tim Etchells the successful enjoyment of a piece of work such as this relies upon a 'knowing' audience being 'attuned to the game, its language and limits ... sensitized to the smallest variations'.<sup>22</sup> As with *Disabled Theater* the piece relies on a predetermined structure set by Bel, with performers given the opportunity to respond to the directive of the song in their own way. Candoco performer Mirjam Gurtener claims the show is about 'authenticity... it plays with the concept of performance'. She supports the notion that there was space for creative collaboration in this piece, despite the predetermined structure, saying that the production invited them to, 'find and discover form for ourselves'.<sup>23</sup> However, the company members only met with Bel after the dress rehearsal, having rehearsed with the 'Restaging Assistants' Dina Ed Dik and Henrique Neves, both collaborators with Bel. Allen Binns, one of the performers revealed that:

We met Jérôme Bel just after the dress rehearsal and he was very positive.

He gave us licence and a bit more agency to really push ourselves. In

certain scenes he wanted us to almost kill ourselves with exhaustion and

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<sup>21</sup> The music featured in *The Show Must Go On* was composed by: Leonard Bernstein, David Bowie, Nick Cave, Norman Gimbel and Charles Fox, J. Horner, W.Jennings, Mark Knopfler, John Lennon and Paul McCartney, Louiguy, Galt MacDermott, Erick "More" Morillo and M. Quashie, Edith Piaf, The Police and Hugh Padgham, Queen, Lionel Richie, A.Romero Monge and R. Ruiz and Paul Simon.

<sup>22</sup> Tim Etchells, 'The Show Must Go On' *RB Jerome Bel*, April 2002  
<<http://www.jeromebel.fr/textsandinterviews/detail?textInter=the%20show%20must%20go%20on%20-%20tim%20etchells>> [accessed 17 July 2015]

<sup>23</sup> Candoco *The Show Must Go On Documentary*

in other scenes he wanted us to be even more tender. In that hour we spent with him he gave greater colour to the work.<sup>24</sup>

Binns' statement gives the impression that the cast had very little contact with Bel himself. The 2015 production was co-commissioned by Sadlers Wells Theatre, Tramway Glasgow and Dance 4 and appears to be one of a number of re-stagings taking place across Europe with mixed-ability casts.<sup>25</sup> Whereas *Disabled Theater* was devised with the company, *The Show Must Go On* had originally been devised with an able-bodied cast. As with *Disabled Theater*, there was a sense that the performers were 'being themselves' performing self-generated pieces of amateur choreography. However, in distinction to *Disabled Theater*, *The Show Must Go On* showed the performers dancing together as a collective. This move away from individual performance to collective performance created a very different effect. Although the form of the 2001 performance had not been modified, the presence of a mixed-ability cast gave the title of this show a new significance, as if the show, and by implication, *life*, must *go on* with each person having no choice but to live and perform with whatever physical, cognitive and material constraints they inherit. This performance did not ask performers to identify their disability; indeed the understated visibility of physical constraint was one of the most noticeable elements.

During Celine Dion's *My Heart Will Go On* the performers, already in pairs, took up the forward-leaning stance made famous by Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio in the film *Titanic*. However, without the convenient support of a ship's

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Bel refers to another restaging in Zurich, with Damian Bright and Remo Beuggert from Theater HORA *Disabled Theater* pp. 163-174

prow to help take the strain the supporting performer had to bear the full weight of the performer extended in front. <sup>26</sup> Each supporting performer appeared to find the task hard but none more so than Linda Fearon whose bent wrists made it difficult for her to achieve the same amount of purchase on the lower body. Seated only metres away on the front row I could see just how much harder Fearon found this task; she made attempts to readjust her grip on a number of occasions and was shaking and sweating more significantly than her co-performers. I found this section particularly heartrending but also felt concerned that I could be accused of romanticising Fearon's disability. <sup>27</sup> However, what I saw felt like an extremely potent reminder of the way in which people with a vast range of 'dis'-abilities, physical, cognitive, economic, social, *go on and carry on* with great success. I found myself torn between reading the performance as representing an ideal staging of inclusivity or as a reminder of how important it is to foreground social and cultural difference as crucial modifiers of human experience.

In terms of its relevance to amateurism, the piece has been celebrated for its 'authenticity'. Audience members cited that it was 'very moving... it felt very authentic... very human' suggesting that the improvised, non virtuosic, amateur performances provided an insight into an authentic experience of 'being-in-the-world'. <sup>28</sup> In the original performance of *The Show Must Go On* the untrained nature of the performers was noteworthy and novel, however in this version of

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<sup>26</sup> *Titanic* director James Cameron (Paramount Pictures, 1997)

<sup>27</sup> Scott Wallin warns against 'settling for rather mawkish sentiments', which might lead the viewer to find performances by disabled actors 'endearing'. Scott Wallin "Come Together" - Discomfort and Longing in JB's Disabled Theater' in *Disabled Theater*, 61-84 (p.74)

<sup>28</sup> Candoco Documentary

the piece, the untrained and disabled nature of the performers seemed beside the point. Dancing became one potential 'ability' amongst many, and all participants demonstrated they were capable of moving with dexterity, rhythm and enthusiasm. In this production I witnessed an ensemble of performers ostensibly ignore and transcend bodily limitations. Ironically, although this production was not necessarily intended to be *about* disability it created a more tangible sense of how both amateur and disabled performers might work meaningfully onstage without foregrounding a lack of ability.

Reading reviews of *The Show Must Go On 2015* I was struck by the way the diverse abilities of the cast had been downplayed. In its nine-minute running time Candoco's *The Show Must Go On Documentary* contains only one brief reference to disability, and this was from Betty Skelton, one of the amateur performers. The company's artistic policy states its intention to draw upon a mix of disabled and non-disabled dancers and to 'ensure disabled dancers have access to professional work.'<sup>29</sup> In her review Lynette Halewood does acknowledge the mix of abilities, describing how some sections manage to show 'the aspiration still lurking inside imperfect bodies' but ultimately she insists upon the 'ordinary' nature of the cast, and writes that 'everyman is on stage'.<sup>30</sup> Mersa Auda focuses on Bel's teasing of the audience, describing how he 'elud[es] their expectations... testing their reactions to unexpected choices' and Judith

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<sup>29</sup> Candoco, 'Artistic Vision' *Candoco Dance Company website* <<http://www.candoco.co.uk/about-us/artistic-vision/>> [Accessed 25 February 2016].

<sup>30</sup> Lynette Halewood, 'Candoco Dance Company Jérôme Bel's *The Show Must Go On* London, Sadler's Wells', 20 March 2015 <<http://dancetabs.com/2015/03/candoco-dance-company-the-show-must-go-on-london/>> [Accessed 23 July 2015].



Mackrell acknowledges that for some the choreography is ‘an obvious struggle, but their differences are swept aside in the collective uplift of emotion’. <sup>31</sup> I am intrigued by the idea that ‘everyman is on stage’ and wonder at the politics of using a differently abled cast to present ‘everyman’. I am unable to decide whether this should be seen as a commendable example of social diversity, a measure of the potential to ‘transcend the body’, or whether the playing down of physical impairment undermines the work disability activists have done to identify a community around a particular set of concerns. For me, one of the most politically effective ways of reading this piece lies in seeing the inclusion of ‘impaired’ bodies as a strategic intervention into a discourse about performing failure that customarily allows the ableism behind the concept of ‘everyman’ to be taken for granted.

The key issue in both *Disabled Theater* and *The Show Must Go On 2015* revolves around the ethics of employing actors with disabilities as an extension of what Bailes has termed a ‘radical amateurism’. Could the casting speak to a politics of inclusivity and should we read the amateur performances by ‘impaired’ bodies as a self-reflexive critique of previous, able-bodied versions of ‘failure’? As Kay Inckle points out, ‘ablebodied people maintain “exceptionalism” over disabled

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<sup>31</sup>Mersa Auda, ‘Candoco Dance Company/Jérôme Bel: The Show Must Go On at Sadler’s Wells’ *The Upcoming* 21 March 2015, <<http://www.theupcoming.co.uk/2015/03/21/candoco-dance-companyjerome-bel-the-show-must-go-on-at-sadlers-wells-dance-review/>> [Accessed 23 July 2015] and Judith Mackrell, ‘The Show Must Go On review – Jerome Bel conjures stage magic with Candoco’, *Guardian*, 23 March 2015 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/mar/23/candoco-jerome-bell-the-show-must-go-on-review>> [Accessed 23 July 2015].

people', a phenomenon which needs to be taken into account in theories of ontology and narratives of human existence.<sup>32</sup> In the case of *Disabled Theater* 'difference' was indeed foregrounded as a way of critiquing able-bodied exceptionalism and yet the piece exaggerated the difference between the company members and the difference between the audience and the cast. Along with names and professions the performers were asked to describe their disability and in response some chose to provide a medicalised definition of that which determines them to be 'other'. *The Show Must Go On* by contrast downplayed difference in favour of creating a sense of collective enterprise. Despite appearing to operate along similar lines - both productions employ a task-based structure using predefined assignments, both employ mixed-ability performers, both invite an ensemble to dance to popular songs - the two shows manifest a different relationship to amateurism and disability.

By inviting Theater HORA actors to dance rather than act *Disabled Theater* raises the difficulty of the task in hand and pits the performers against one another. By inviting the audience to read through the frame of 'disabled theatre' it could be seen to put forward the 'social model' of disability theory, which describes a key difference between a medical 'impairment' and 'disability' as the social and material obstacles presented by an able-ist culture. The piece demonstrates that the actors are more than able to respond to Bel's task whilst inviting audience members to consider why and how they might read the performances as flawed amateur or dis-abled. *The Show Must Go On*, by contrast does not invite comparisons to an ableist culture in the same way, instead it presents an

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<sup>32</sup> Inckle, 'Debilitating Times', p. 54.

ensemble of performers who all identify as disabled but whose disabilities are not necessarily visible. Co-Artistic Director of Candoco, Stina Nilson has stated, '[Bel] works on breaking down the performer's power so that the audience feel as if it could be them on stage.[...] This has a resonance for Candoco and our approach to looking for diversity and the idea of playing with *who* is on the stage.'<sup>33</sup> This dissolution of the 'power' of the performer and the celebration of the amateur results in the difference between the audience and the ensemble being undermined.

Halewood's description of *The Show Must Go On* ensemble as 'everyman' chimes with the work of disability theorists such as Lennard J. Davis, who feels that 'disability' should be a term extended to all in the postmodern, or as he terms it, 'dismodern' age. Although Davis is critical of the plurality of the 'categories of oppressed others' contributed by postmodern politics he puts forward the idea that 'disability can be seen as *the* postmodern subject position'.<sup>34</sup> He asserts that, 'disability is itself an unstable category' and that this can be seen to be a 'subset of the instability of identity in the postmodern era'.<sup>35</sup> Most crucially he argues that 'disability presents us with a malleable view of the human body and identity' and is a part of 'dismodernism', which is a, 'new kind of universalism and cosmopolitanism that is reacting to the localization of identity'.<sup>36</sup> I find the proposition of a 'new universalism' interesting in relation to my sense that the differently-abled bodies in *The Show Must Go On* represent 'everyman'. Is it

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<sup>33</sup> Stine Nilson, *The Show Must Go On Documentary* Candoco 2014  
<<http://www.candoco.co.uk/productions/programmes-and-projects/past/the-show-must-go-on/>> [accessed 26 February 2016].

<sup>34</sup> Davis, 'End of Identity Politics' p. 265, *my emphasis*.

<sup>35</sup> Davis, 'End of Identity Politics' pp. 271-2.

<sup>36</sup> Davis, 'End of Identity Politics' p. 273.

appropriate to argue for the differently-abled cast replacing previous iterations of able-bodied everymen and standing in for a *new* everyman or the *new* postmodern subject? I am inclined, in the spirit of inclusivity, to answer in the affirmative, even though, as a feminist I am disinclined to do away with a subaltern category.

Davis argues that difference is an outdated problem; the emphasis should now be on malleability and a new universalism. My sense is that in *Disabled Theater* a 'difference' is marked between cast and audience but in *The Show Must Go On*, difference goes unmarked both between the audience and the cast members and between the ensemble of performers. Songs such as *Come Together* and *Into My Arms* prompt performers to literally enact a process of reaching out and embracing. The untrained, amateur dancing is disarming for the audience and strategic gaps in the songs invite them to sing along and feel the customary distinction between performers and audience eradicated. In *Disabled Theater* Fabienne Villiger qualifies the description of his disability with 'so what?' a slightly defensive rejoinder. There is no such defensiveness in *The Show Must Go On* partly because the bodies have not been announced or presented as 'different'.

Whilst uneasy about accepting the idea of disability as the 'new' or latest postmodern subject, I do consider that *The Show Must Go On* provides a way of returning to the material reality of the amateur dancers on stage without necessarily essentialising a shared experience or downplaying the centrality of the body and what it can or cannot do to a person's lived daily experience. As

such it provides a robust critique of the social model of disability, which is founded on a subjectivity marginalised by mainstream society, downplays the day to day reality of lived bodily experience and perpetuates the idea of disability as negative.<sup>37</sup> Watching the performers dance the audience gets a sense of how the differently abled cast members cope with and respond to each imperative to 'move'. Although this task-based model shares some features with *Disabled Theater*, in *The Show Must Go On* the focus is upon the uplifting potential of dance rather than on individual technique. The audience watch them 'go on' and get a sense of how they might go about their daily business unimpeded by all but social prejudice. The suspension of virtuosity promotes the illusion that the audience could participate in the performance on equal terms with the performers. The driving force behind *The Show Must Go on* lies in its suggestion that virtuosity is beside the point because everyone can transcend the limitations of their social and material circumstances given the right soundtrack and the space to dance.

In thinking through what Bel has called the 'slipperiness' of representing people with disabilities on stage the key problem is distilled into the question of whether he, as choreographer, author or director is interested in the 'real' amateur and professional bodies on stage or interested in their metaphorical potential to 'disable theatre'. Bel's interest in working with disabled actors is an extension of his interest in working with amateur or untrained dancers. Supposedly disabled and amateur performers find it difficult to disguise their 'vulnerabilities and incapacities'. Does this mean that the disabled actor

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<sup>37</sup> Inckle, 'Debilitating Times', p. 46

represents, for Bel, the apotheosis of the amateur actor or is his main concern to confront the marginalisation of disabled actors? Inevitably, it is possible for him to be interested in both, whilst also being aware of what Foucault called 'the author function', a figure with 'economic and theological power'.<sup>38</sup> It is possible that Bel is all too aware of his place within the discourse of 'performing failure' and that this creative departure represents a self-reflexive critique of his previous practice of using only able-bodied performers to 'fail'. If, as we understand from Lepecki, '[w]hat distinguishes [Bel's] particular mode of critiquing the representational is his insistence in uncovering how choreography specifically participates in, and is accomplice of, representation's "submission of subjectivity" under modern structures of power', then the collaboration with disabled actors allows him to critique ableist modern power structures in particular.<sup>39</sup> Lepecki considers representation to be, 'an ontohistorical force, a power that in the West has entrapped subjectivity within a series of isomorphic equivalences'.<sup>40</sup> Despite differences in the staging of the individual both *Disabled Theatre* and *The Show Must Go On* can be seen to draw upon the 'authenticity' of the amateur and disabled performers to draw attention to the need for isomorphic plurality.

For me, one of the most important, and perhaps unforeseen benefits of Bel's mixed-ability work, is that it has provided a key opportunity to review the way the performance of failure has been theorised. It has provided an opportunity to draw attention to the hidden imperative of 'compulsory able-bodiedness' in the

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<sup>38</sup> Foucault quoted in Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance* p. 51.

<sup>39</sup> Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance* p. 46.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

field of performing failure.<sup>41</sup> Existing writing has paid little attention to the heightened risk of failure for differently abled members of society and has focused upon the 'false' amateurism Bailes evokes in relation to the work of Forced Entertainment. Bel's bringing together of amateur disabled dancers provides an opportunity to examine assumptions about the particular representational strategies deemed to fit with subjects whose lives are affected by particular social and material circumstances. Bel has attested to the 'political' nature of his work and asserts that his choice of 'bodies' *is* actively political. Indeed, he has gone so far as to say, 'it is difficult for me to work with somebody very strong and beautiful!' <sup>42</sup> The 'weak' body is a key concept and signifier in what Bauer has described as Bel's 'representational game'. <sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Inckle, 'Debilitating Times', p. 43.

<sup>42</sup> Bauer, 'Interview' p. 48.

<sup>43</sup> Bauer, 'Interview', p. 35.